

New Feathers

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Summary: Set right after the series. Ch 5 uploaded. Nemu's Day of Flight finally arrives.

1. Ch 1 Part I

Chapter 1 Part I

Rakka felt sluggish. Though winter was coming to a close, the young Haibane felt as if she had come down with a cold. She groaned, suddenly remembering the two cocoons growing in the west wing. Since no one had come to get her since she had fallen asleep, Rakka knew that nothing had happened overnight.

Changing after a quick shower, Rakka briskly walked over to the west wing. Snow was melting on the ground. Nemu had said that it would be less than a month until flowers began to bloom. The wing covers were becoming a bother. She wanted to feel the air flowing through her wings again.

"Good morning," Hikari beamed as Rakka entered the old store room. Rakka nearly gasped. The cocoons had tripled in size since she had gone to bed. Both had shifted to either side of the room. Never having seen one for herself, Rakka approached the one on her right and stroked its surface. The cocoon felt like an old coffee cup where the glaze had chipped off: rough, yet only barely.

"Nemu is visiting the bakery, library, and clock tower to say none of us will be coming in for a few days. Kana just left to get the halo molds. The Communicator will understand that you'll be busy here for a little while."

"Thank you," Rakka replied, a little flustered. She hadn't even considered her job in all the excitement late yesterday. She noticed both cocoons were about the same size. "Was mine this big?"

"Just about," Hikari replied. "It's too bad; I think the young

feathers wanted some new friends." They smiled. "Everything's set up by the way in the common room," Hikari continued.

"Why didn't you ask me to help?"

"You're going to be up all night with these two once they hatch. I might stay up too. Even Raka never had to take care of two newly born Haibane at once."

"Thanks." Hikari nodded. "How long do you think it will be?"

"Three hours, maybe," Hikari guessed. The cocoons have just begun to turn gray. The others should be back by then for sure. Hey, I'll go off and make us some breakfast for us if you take my place."

"Sure," Rakka replied enthusiastically. Left alone with the cocoons, Rakka put her ear to one's side and closed her eyes. She could hear the fluid inside swirling around. Her hand shaking slightly, she knocked twice on the shell. She did the same on the other before standing back to address them both.

"Um," Rakka honestly didn't know what to say. "If you two can hear me, I'd like to say that you'll both be alright. My name is Rakka. I know it feels a little strange in there. Take as long as you need. There's a warm bed waiting when both of you get out of there. I'm going to be taking care of you for the next few days. Sometimes being a Haibane isn't easy, but I love my life here. No Haibane can remember their life before their cocoon dream, but I'd to think my time here as been the most meaningful of my whole life."

Rakka wiped her eyes, memories of Reki flooding back. She took a moment to compose herself before sitting in the chair Hikari had brought in for herself. A few minutes later the high spirited Haibane returned with a plate of eggs and toast. Rakka ate slowly, the nervous excitement already building within her.

Just as Rakka finished eating, Kana and Nemu returned together. "It's almost time," Nemu commented.

"You sure you don't want me to get that hammer?" Kana asked jokingly, sinisterly stroking one of the cocoons.

"Stop, Kana," Hikari seriously rebuffed. "They can hear you in there you know!"

"They could hear that," Nemu said under her breath. Before anyone else could speak, the cocoon on the right began to crack. Everyone stood back, eyes glancing briefly towards the door to make sure it was open. The rush of water came on suddenly, a single wave, reaching the knees of each Haibane before washing out the door. When the fluid cleared, a young woman in a light beige smock was passed out on the floor.

"Kana, help me take her to the common room," Rakka asked before retrieving the makeshift stretcher in the hall. Nemu agreed to stay behind just incase the other cocoon hatched. With Kana at the front of the stretcher, Rakka could get a good look at the new Haibane. The girl, only slightly younger than Rakka, had long auburn hair and pale skin. Her face appeared peaceful as if she were in the midst of a pleasant dream.

"I hope I helped," Rakka whispered softly right before the newest member of Old Home was taken into the daylight for the first time.

2. Ch 1 Part II

Chapter 1 Part II

"Where am I?" The girl spoke even before she had opened her eyes. Someone placed a hand on her forehead. A blurred image came into view, a smiling face. "Heaven?"

"No," Rakka laughed, gently touching her halo. The girl sat up, slowly taking in her surroundings. Besides the winged girl, a sleeping teenage boy was in the bed next to her. The walls were adorned with oil paintings. A dining table with six chairs were on the far side of the room. The few crumbs still on the table hinted that a meal had just occurred.

Before either had the chance to speak, Hikari, Kana, and Nemu entered.

"Good afternoon," each said in a different variation.

"You ask about her dream yet?" Kana asked.

"Just about to," Rakka replied. She turned her attention back to the newborn. "So then," Rakka began. "What did you see in your dream?"

"Um," the girl brought her knees to her chest. "I was in bed, like this almost. I felt tired, like I had stayed up for days." Nemu nodded knowingly.

"Is that all?" Rakka asked. The girl nodded. Rakka looked to her fellow Haibane. They nodded. She turned back to the girl.

"Your name is nowâ€|Sukare."

"Sukaâ€|" the girl trailed off, her mouth agape.

"It's alright," Rakka reassured. Every Haibane forgets the name from her past life. It's custom that our new names come from the dream we had in the cocoon." Sukare nodded, understanding to some extent.

Now that the naming was complete, Hikari stood forward, revealing that she was holding the halo mold behind her back. "Haibane Sukare," Hikari began, opening the mold. Steam drifted up from the hot metal. With her tongs, Hikari lifted the golden ring.

"It's alright," Rakka reassured Sukare as Hikari brought the ring over Sukare's head. After a slight wobble, the halo remained in place. Sukare blushed noticing how everyone was looking at her.

"Well, we'll check back in with you tomorrow," Nemu said. "We might be back later today though if he wakes up."

"Yeah, you'll have to hear us give the same speech to him," Kana said lightly. The three left.

"You'll get to learn their names tomorrow," Rakka began, "it's been so busy today. No one can ever remember two Haibane being born at once. I'm Rakka, by the way."

"Rakka," Sukare repeated.

Sukare's wings finally appeared late that night. Rakka had held the girl's hand the entire time. When Sukare's wings broke free, the girl only took in a quick breath of air before passing out. With only the moonlight aiding her, Rakka cleaned Sukare's wings. It was a difficult task; Rakka had already pulled out a few feathers by accident.

The door opening behind her made Rakka turned her head. Hikari walked in. Specks of blood covered her white blouse. "So it happened," Rakka noticed.

"Yes, just a few minutes ago," Hikari said. Just came to get the extra brush out of the kit. Nomu was just like Sukare. He didn't even whimper." Nomu had dreamt of drinking something sweet while sitting on a grassy hill. "He's such a polite boy. It was so nice to talk to him before the fever broke out. I know Old Home has isn't co-ed, but I hope the Haibane Renmei allows him to stay."

"At least until he gets a job in the city," Rakka added.

"Well, I should be getting back." The two smiled at one another before Hikari stepped outside.

"Who was that?" Sukare slowly lifted her head. Even in the darkness Rakka could see the emerald green of Sukare's eyes.

"Hikari is the Haibane with blonde hair. She's looking after Nomu, the boy who was in the other bed. When you were asleep earlier we took him to another room. We thought you would like the privacy when your wings came in."

"Thank you." The voice was weak. Sukare was half asleep. Continuing her work, Rakka could only smile. Rakka continued to clean Sukare's wings, which Rakka hoped by morning would be a spotless charcoal gray.

Sukare gasped as her new wings responded to the touch of her hand. Sitting up in bed, she remained speechless as the wings instinctively pulled back. A second touch elicited a giggle from the girl.

"You like them?" Rakka asked as she entered from the other room carrying a tray of tea.

"They're beautiful," Sukare said, stroking her left wing. She slowly stood and walked to the window.

"Come sit down at the table," Rakka called. "We can talk." The two

sat across from each other. As Rakka poured tea, Sukare reached for the sugar bowl. She hesitated just as he hand was about to touch its edge.

"How is it that I know that I like sugar in my tea but not anything else?" Sukare's tone had immediately changed. To hide her trembling fingers, Sukare pulled her hand back. Rakka readied herself to run to the other side of the table. Yet Sukare restrained herself. A few deep breaths later the girl had calmed down enough for Rakka to talk.

"Let me tell you everything," Rakka began, handing Sukare her tea.

3. Ch 2

Chapter II

Nomu ran a hand through his near black hair. Hikari was right. The pain he had experienced the night before seemed like an unbelievable dream. The gray wings now attached to his back were the amazing evidence that it had all been real. He smiled, almost hopping out of bed. The fever from the previous night had broken, leaving Nomu with an abundance of energy.

"Oh, you're up," Hikari cheery voice greeted from the doorway.

"Yeah," Nomu replied, turning around. "I feel so good right now."

"That's good to know," Hikari replied. "I came to say that you'll have to wait a while for some new clothes. Only female Haibane have ever lived her and we'll have to go to town to get you something to wear."

"Okay," Nomu replied. "I didn't think I was supposed to go outside in this anyway." He pulled on the smock, chuckling slightly.

"Are you hungry?" Hikari held up the small pot of rice. Nomu nodded eagerly. Sitting at the table, the young man began to devour the rice. "You should slow down," Hikari said. "It's the first thing you've ever eaten. You might get sick."

"Sorry, I justâ€¦" Nomu trailed off before slowly finishing his meal. He let out a satisfied sigh upon finishing.

"Now that you're done," Hikari began, "would you like to meet the other Haibane who was just born? She got to see you yesterday when you were still asleep."

"What's her name?"

"Sukare," Hikari replied. "She said she felt tired in her dream." Hikari led Nomu down the hall. "Rakka," Hikari called out after knocking on the door to the common room. "I've brought Nomu to meet Sukare." Nomu could hear two voices briefly talking before Rakka replied.

"Come in." Hikari motioned for Nomu to enter first. The young man took a few tentative steps into the room. Two girls about his age were sitting across from one another. Nomu could immediately tell which one was Sukare; she was dressed the same way he was.

"Morning, Nomu" Rakka said, motioning to a chair. Nomu took a seat. "I'm Rakka." She turned her head slightly to address both of them. "There's a lot to learn about being a Haibane, but I'd first like to welcome you to Old Home."

Later that afternoon the senior residents of Old Home took Sukare shopping for clothes. They promised Nomu that they would bring something back for him to wear. Left by himself, Nomu lounged on the East Wing's balcony overlooking the courtyard. The warm afternoon sun raised his spirits. Though Rakka had said that the loss of memories might cause depression, Nomu felt carefree. What he didn't know couldn't hurt him. It's as if a great weight had been taken off his shoulders.

Nomu basked in the sun for a moment longer before the sound of footsteps made him look down in the courtyard. Old Home's housemother was escorting the young feathers back from a trip to town. To get a better look, Nomu stood. It only took a moment for one of the young feathers to spot him.

"It's him," Hana yelled out ecstatically. Almost immediately all the children were begging the housemother to meet the new Haibane.

"Well young man," the housemother called up to Nomu after she was unable to quiet the children, "would you mind meeting with these kids for a few minutes?"

"Okay," Nomu said somewhat hesitantly. The housemother led the children into the East Wing and up to the balcony. The children immediately surrounded Nomu, bombarding him with questions.

"Did it hurt when your wings came out?"

"What was your cocoon dream?"

"Why are you the only older boy here?"

"One at a time," the housemother commanded.

"Thank you," Nomu said to the housemother once the children had quieted down. "I don't know why I'm the only older boy here. I'll have to leave if the Haibane Renmei want me to go." The young feathers cried out together in distress. Is it really that rare when a Haibane is born, Nomu wondered. "I won't go unless I have to, though." The young feathers' mood quickly improved.

"You have to come and play with us sometime," Shorta begged. "The girls are no fun!"

"I promise I will," Nomu said. "Even if I have to go, I'll still come by and play with you first." Shorta and the other young boys cheered.

"Alright," the housemother finally said, "I think we've bothered the young man enough today. He'll still recuperating, you know."

The housemother led the children away. Nomu waved to the few that took a second look at him. Turning his attention back to the pleasant day, Nomu fell asleep in the early spring sun.

"There you are." It wasn't the voice, but the touch of a hand on his shoulder that awoke Nomu. He groggily looked up to see Sukare's face looking down on him. Before he could say anything, a cold wind blew. Nomu shivered, suddenly realizing that it was dusk. "Let's get you back inside," Sukare added, helping Nomu to his feet.

"Thanks for getting me," Nomu said. "I might have frozen out here. Hey, you got new clothes." Once they had gone inside Nomu was able to take a look at what Sukare had bought for herself. The girl had decided on a pair of loose fitting dark jeans, tennis shoes, and a blue blouse.

"The tailor there made holes for my wings too." She twirled slightly to show off her wings. "We got you some clothes too," she exclaimed, suddenly remembering. "I put them in the common room. Come on, you need to try on them on." Sukare took Nomu by the wrist, pulling him along the entire way.

"It looks great on you," Nemu commented as Nomu came back into the common room after changing.

"You think?" Nomu asked inquisitively. He looked down at himself. Though the jean jacket was intended for colder weather, it felt comfortable enough for the early spring. Below that was a button up dark green cotton shirt. His pants were dark beige kakis. Like Sukare, the girls had chosen a pair of tennis shoes for him. "Best to work in," Kana said at seeing Nomu looking down at his shoes.

"Thank you," Nomu said to everyone. Though he might have chosen differently, it felt almost reassuring to own something, even if it was old clothes. As he was lost in thought, Rakka entered the common room.

"Nomu, Sukare, there was a letter from the Haibane Renmei waiting at the entrance. Both of you are going to the temple tomorrow."

4. Ch 3

Chapter III

"Nomu, it's time to wake up." Nomu stretched on his cot before opening his eyes. Nemu was standing over him. She was still in her pajamas. "Just wanted to make sure you were up and about before I took a shower. It's a big day for you." Nemu briefly smiled before stepping outside Nomu's small bedroom.

Nomu slowly sat up, an audible crack coming from his knees. He yawned loudly before standing up. His wings subconsciously stretched with

his arms. The window frame groaned with rust as Nomu opened it. He was met with the cool breeze of the early spring morning. From his window Nomu could see all the wings of Old Home. A low fog hung over the complex. Nomu could only see the top of the courtyard's fountain. The sky was overcast as well. 'Not the best day to decide my fate', Nomu thought to himself somewhat cynically. He took a deep breath to clear his mind. Nomu had told him the evening before about the abandoned factory.

"They're just like us," she had said. "They work in the city and take care of one another. We only take care of their young feathers since they do not have the space. Rakka says it's because they're childish that they can't take care for their little ones. If you have to live there, no one will hold it against you that you were born here. They'll accept you."

The kind words only comforted Nomu to a degree. He had only come to accept Old Home as a reality. Though he had been told about the wall around Glie, the town itself and the surrounding pastures seemed like a world away. The abandoned factory was part of that unknown world. Like the unknown hidden under the fog, Nomu could not begin to imagine his future. For the first time in his short life Nomu regretted not having memories of his past existence. There was nothing to comfort him.

Nomu's mood had picked up considerably by the time he, Rakka, and Sukare set out towards the temple. The weather had greatly improved.

"You sure like the sunshine," Sukare commented as she saw Nomu with his eyes briefly closed, his face towards the light.

"This morning was just so sad," Nomu replied almost lightheartedly. "Rakka, how long does the spring and summer last in Glie."

"I actually don't know," Rakka replied somewhat sheepishly. "This is my first spring here as well."

"Then we'll all get to find out together," Sukare exclaimed. Neither of the two girls noticed that Nomu's smile was only half hearted.

The three reached the temple soon after. Rakka had explained on the way the rules of their visit. The Renmei tending the grounds greeted them before attaching the customary wrist and wing bells. They stepped inside the temple, Rakka leading the way. Washi was standing by himself next to a stone table where a piece of parchment lay. He brought his wrists together. The three Haibane did the same.

"So these are the two newborns," Washi stated. He sounded relieved. "Nomu and Sukare." He stood in front of Sukare. "No need to be scared of me, girl," Washi said at seeing her downcast eyes. She looked up at him. "There. Sukare, you have been accepted as a Haibane. We at the temple wish for your success in your new life." He handed her a red cheque book from his coat.

"The same goes for you, Haibane Nomu," Washi continued, standing in front of the young man. Washi gave Nomu an identical cheque book.

"There is something else I need to speak with you about. I have been the communicator at this temple for many years. Not in that time has a male Haibane been born at Old Home. I have always accepted it as some natural law. But it is not for me to say that your birth there was a good or bad thing. I have been told that there was nothing wrong with your cocoon dream. You remember it clearly?" Nomu nodded.

"It is for that reason then I cannot impose anything upon you. It is your decision that you remain living at Old Home or not. Do you wish to stay there?"

Despite his shock, Nomu was able to reply properly. The bell jingled as he lifted his right wing, the signal for yes. Since his eyes were fixed on Washi, he could not see the small smile that had appeared on Rakka and Sukare's faces.

"Very well then," Washi added. "I wish you happiness here, Haibane Nomu." Unable to say thank you, Nomu nodded again. After formally parting, the three walked back outside and returned the bells to the groundskeeper. After walking for a few minutes in respect of the temple, Rakka placed her hand on Nomu's shoulder.

"I'm glad you decided to stay. Old Home always welcomes a new face."

"Thank you." Nomu sounded genuinely relieved.

Where the road forked, Rakka turned to speak to Nomu and Sukare. "I'm not going to be able to go back to Old Home with you. I actually work at the temple and need to get back soon. If you head right you'll be at Old Home in no time."

"Oh, alright," Sukare said. "Thanks for taking us today, Rakka."

"Thank you," Nomu added. Rakka smiled.

"See you tonight." Rakka turned and began to walk away.

Nomu made one step in the direction of Old Home before he felt a tug at his sleeve. Sukare had taken a slight hold on his shirt. He looked at her inquisitively. Sukare was watching Rakka intently.

"Hey," Sukare whispered under her breath once Rakka was out of earshot. "Want to go see Glie? I felt really bad that you couldn't come with us yesterday."

"Sure," Nomu said without a second thought. "Show me the way." The two newborn Haibane set off towards Glie, both ready to enjoy a lighthearted day.

5. Ch 4

Chapter IV

After a brief walk, Nomu and Sukare reached the center of town. The late morning market was bustling with customers. Though the townspeople were busy with their shopping, Nomu noticed occasional

glances in his and Sukare's direction.

"Did people stare at you yesterday?" Nomu whispered to his companion.

"Yeah." Sukare sounded somewhat embarrassed. "Rakka told me that the villagers keep their distance from us. She said it was out of respect. We help them by working as to not be a burden on the town. I can't blame them for staring. We do have wings after all."

"I guess we'll just have to get used to it," Nomu replied lightheartedly. The two laughed. Both knew the rule on secondhand objects. Thankfully there were a few places selling used items.

"Have a look; everyone's welcome," a portly older gentleman greeted as Nomu and Sukare approached his stall.

"These are beautiful," Sukare exclaimed after finding a pair of winter gloves.

"Winter's always just around the corner in Glie," the owner commented. Sukare eagerly handed over the first cheque from her notebook. Nomu did the same for a pair of dark sunglasses. Though neither would admit it, the purchases were not out of any necessity but from the desire to feel normal amongst the throng of villagers.

Their trinkets tucked away, Sukare and Nomu continued on to a nearby restaurant for lunch. Both were relieved to find out that Haibane were treated just the same as the other customers. "Thank you," Sukare said to the waiter after receiving their menus. Since Nomu had mentioned it earlier, she couldn't help but notice the occasional stare. Thought it was slightly annoying, the attention wasn't completely unappreciated to Sukare.

Afterwards Sukare took Nomu on a tour of the town. She pointed out where the other Haibane of Old Home worked. Since both of them were going behind Rakka's back in visiting the town, they didn't drop by and visit their new friends. For Nomu the trip was enlightening none the less.

"Glie looks like a wonderful place," Nomu commented on the way back. "Thanks for taking me around."

"You're welcome," she replied, blushing slightly.

"You two have a nice day?" Hikari asked that night at dinner. All the residents of Old Home were present, even the children and home mother. The boys were overjoyed at hearing that Nomu would be staying.

"Nomu's gonna be the goalie on our team!" Dai shouted, referring to the following day's game of soccer.

"Ours!" Shorta yelled.

"Quiet, you two!" Rakka yelled, showing a rare moment of

sternness.

"How bout I switch off every quarter," Nomu suggested. The two boys reluctantly agreed to the compromise.

"Thanks," Rakka whispered to Nomu.

"No problem. Today went great," Nomu continued, turning his attention back to Hikari. "I'm still here after all."

"No offense," Kana said, her mouth half full of food, "but it's been ages since one of the older boys from the abandoned factory has even visited Old Home. I thought we'd never see you here again."

"Well, the Communicator basically said he didn't want to mess with fate," Nomu replied. "I guess I'm stuck," he concluded with smile.

"Well, we're all happy you're staying," Nemu added. "Aren't we?" She asked to everyone at the table. The other Haibane nodded in reply.

After helping wash dishes, Sukare stepped out onto the balcony outside the common room. The early twilight shone brilliantly off the crumbling plaster of Old Home.

"Hey." Sukare turned. Nomu was sitting in one of the few teak wood chairs.

"So that's where you went." Sukare smiled. "By the way, thanks for helping out with dinner."

"It was nothing."

"You alright?" Sukare had noticed a faint tremor in Nomu's voice.

"Ummâ€¦" Nomu bit his lip before speaking. "When I came out here, I suddenly felt like I needed to sit down. I don't know if I can get up. Isn't that strange." Nomu forced a chuckle, comically banging his leg with his fist a few times. "I can still feel butâ€¦"

"Rakka!" Sukare yelled, her own voice beginning to shake. "Come out here!"

"What's wrong?" Rakka had appeared in what seemed like less than a second. Shortly behind her were Hikari and Kana.

"It's okay," Nomu reassured, holding up his hands to show that he was alright. He turned to Rakka. "My legs, they gave out after I walked out here, that's all."

Rakka sighed in relief. She had fully expected a broken bone or worse. Understanding for themselves, Hikari and Kana went back inside. "It's just stress," Rakka explained. "Same thing happened to me, too. At least you found a chair in time." Rakka laughed to herself. "Let's get you up."

On the count of three, Rakka and Sukare were able to get Nomu to his feet.

"Thanks," Nomu said, visibly relieved. He took a few hesitant steps before his confidence returned.

"Though it probably won't happen again, be careful okay?" Giving Nomu a pat on the shoulder, Rakka went back inside.

"Did I really scare you that much?" Nomu asked softly to make sure that no one inside could hear.

"A little," Sukare replied, embarrassed. "How are we supposed to know if something is wrong with us or not? We're not human like the people in the town." Sukare had become visibly upset.

"Hey," Nomu interrupted, placing both hands on her shoulders. "I'm okay, Sukare. Nothing's going to happen to me." Sukare nodded. "Thanks for caring, though. I might have been sitting there for a while if you hadn't said anything."

"You're welcome." Nomu lowered his hands. They stood silently for a moment. Rubbing her shoulders, Sukare made the excuse of feeling a chill before rushing back inside.

"So what do you think?" A week had passed since that awkward evening on the porch. Sukare and Nemu were in the library cataloguing new books.

"It's not very stressful," Sukare admitted. "I do like the quiet."

"I'm glad," Nemu replied. She sounded almost relieved.

"You okay, Nemu? You sound sick."

Nemu smiled. "I just take after my name, that's all. It has been a little worse lately, though. It's probably just because the weather's changing." The elder Haibane took a deep breath in an attempt to clear her head. "Maybe I should eat more," she said to herself, her cheerful attitude returning somewhat.

"I don't know why I don't feel tired like you, Nomu. I mean, my cocoon dream was so intense. I don't know how long I'd have to stay up to actually feel that way."

"Well, you're lucky," Nemu admitted. "All Haibane aren't blessed with perfect health, after all." She thought of Kuramori for a brief moment before turning back to her work.

The two kept each other company for the remainder of the day. The work was tedious and slow, something Nemu apologized for as they finished up labeling the last stack of books. The sun was nearly set; Sukare felt starved.

"We'll be back at Old Home in no time," Nemu promised as they stepped outside the front door. She paused briefly, stroking the aged oak with her hand before locking up. "Long day," she said to Sukare after she caught the girl staring. The two walked in silence.

Sukare didn't know what to say. She could tell something was troubling Nemu. When Sukare could barely make out Old Home in the distance, Nemu began to fall forward. At the last moment Sukare reached out and grabbed Nemu by the arm, keeping her from falling.

"Thank you," Nemu said, placing a hand on her chest. She slowly brought herself upright. "I'll be okay, Sukare."

"You sure?" Nemu nodded. Though not another word was said between them during the walk back, Sukare could feel that the next day would be very long.

6. Ch 5

Chapter V

A cold hand touching her shoulder, Sukare awoke with a start. She pulled away for the brief moment it took her eyes to adjust to the dim light.

"Nemu?"

"Sorry if I scared you," Nemu replied. She slowly sat on the edge of Sukare's bed.

"What are you doing up, Nemu? It's still really early." It was only then that Sukare noticed that Nemu was fully dressed. "Are you still feeling sick?"

"Not sick exactly," Nemu replied. "Last night was the first time in my life where I couldn't sleep. I know Rakka hasn't talked to you or Nemu about it yet, but every Haibane leaves Glie after some time. It's called our Day of Flight. That day has come for me, it seems. I feel it. You will too someday." Nemu allowed a moment to pass for Sukare to take in what she had just said.

"I know it's a lot to understand," Nemu continued. "But I need to ask something of you."

"Anything," Sukare replied, sitting up.

"Walk with me," Nemu whispered. "I feel even more exhausted than yesterday. I might fall again if I go alone." Her eyes had drifted away from Sukare's.

"I'll come with you," Sukare promised. Unable to think of anything else, Sukare embraced Nemu. "You'll get where you need to go."

"Thank you."

"Can you give me a minute to get ready? Do you have to be somewhere at a specific time?"

"Go ahead. I have all day."

"Well," Sukare said as she stood up. "Lie down here for a little while I take a shower and dress. Get a few minutes of rest if you

can." Nemu nodded, laying her head on Sukare's pillow.

A half hour later Sukare was ready to go. Nemu was still lying on her side. "Did you sleep?" Sukare asked as she helped Nemu stand.

"Couldn't. Thanks for letting me lie down though."

It was a clear morning as the two left Old Home. Sukare could tell that it would be a warm day. As a precaution they had linked arms. After a few minutes Nemu was supporting her weight on the younger girl.

"Hey," Sukare began, "stay awake, Nemu. How am I going to help you if you can't show me the way?" Though Nemu didn't reply, Sukare could feel herself being led through the Western woods.

"Why did you pick me, Nemu?" Though the question had been on her mind since they had left, the unsettling feeling of being in the woods prompted Sukare to finally ask.

"If I had asked Hikari or Kana it would hurt them so much. Just wait until you've lived at Old Home for a few years. You'll grow so close to people. Then you'll understand why Haibane usually leave without notice."

"It's not that I don't like you," Nemu quickly added. "You're a wonderful person, Sukare. If it had been Hikari or Kana, I just wouldn't have been able to let go." Though Sukare couldn't turn her head, she could hear Nemu whimper slightly.

"I understand." She tightened her grasp on Nemu. Her next words came out as a whisper. "Thank you for trusting me."

"You're welcome." The two paused briefly so Sukare could rap her arm around Nemu's back. For the older Haibane walking was becoming nearly impossible. "We're almost there," Nemu said as they continued walking. A clearing was only a few meters ahead.

"Oh my—" Sukare's voice caught in her throat as they exited the forest. The wall, though still a half mile away, towered over everything.

"It's right over there." Nemu raised her arm. In the middle of the clearing was the alter. To Sukare it looked like an ancient ruin. Moss had nearly overgrown the stone.

"Are you sure?" Nemu nodded.

"Positive." The two struggled the last few steps. Sukare was panting as they finally made it onto the platform.

"What do I do now, Nemu?" The area had grown completely quiet. Not even the wind was blowing.

"Close your eyes." Sukare did so. She felt an unnatural warmth surround hers and Nemu's body. A drop of wetness on her cheek followed. Before Sukare could open her eyes to see if it had been a tear or raindrop, she passed out.

Rakka wasn't sure why she awoke so early that morning. Though she wouldn't have to go to work until early that afternoon, she went through her routine in the pre dawn twilight. A serene morning greeted her as Rakka stepped onto the balcony with a strong cup of tea. The pleasant outdoor warmth reminded her of her first days as a Haibane. As Rakka was letting herself bathe in those pleasant memories, a glint of light caught the corner of her eye. Turning her head, Rakka clearly saw the beam of blue light shooting up from the western woods.

"Goodbye," Rakka whispered. Though she had no idea who it was, Rakka felt a slight morning in her heart nonetheless. Rakka sipped her tea, watching the pale beauty for the few seconds it lasted. She soon returned inside to wake the others. It was time to make a trip to the western woods.

"Sukare!" The voice, though yelling, seemed distant. Her mind was still in a haze. Sukare slowly opened her eyes to the sight of the mid afternoon sky. It was overcast. She felt the hard stone beneath her. I must have fallen, she realized, turning her head towards the voice that had called her name.

In the distance Sukare could make out Hikari, Rakka, Kana, and Nomu. Within seconds they were at her side.

"What happened?" Rakka was nearly frantic as she helped Sukare sit up.

"It was Nemu." Sukare placed her hand on her forehead. Sitting up so suddenly had started her head spinning. "She said she was too weak to come out here by herself." Sukare quickly looked back and forth.

"Where'd she go? Nemu was right next to me." Sukare suddenly remembered the warmth that had surrounded her.

"Up there," Kana replied, looking up. "Everyone in town could see the beam of light. We thought you might have gone off to see what it was by yourself."

"It's so easy to get lost out here," Hikari warned, her protective nature showing through her usual timid attitude. "You might not have been able to find your way back."

Nomu and Kana pulled Sukare to her feet. "What was it like?" Kana asked quietly. "You were right next to Nemu, weren't you?"

"It felt like a sunny day," Sukare replied. "I don't remember much after that. Is Nemu really up there?"

"Don't really know," Kana replied nonchalantly. "I don't think even the Haibane Renmei know for sure. Well, we should get going."

"Where?"

"That's right, you don't know. We're going to go pray for Nemu. It's a nice little shrine. Ah, almost forgot." Kana reached down and picked up the metal ring lying at her feet.

"Is thatâ€|"

"Yep. Nemu's halo." Kana handed it to Sukare. "They always go dark without a wearer. We leave it with the others after we pray. Come on, we should hurry if we want to get back to Old Home before dark."

Late that night Sukare lay awake in bed. She couldn't sleep. Though praying at the shrine brought a certain sense of closure for the girl, something else was causing her insomnia. The sheer number of halos at the shrine brought a sharp humility to Sukare. Was it really all she could aspire to as a Haibane? Why had Kana been so casual knowing that Nemu was gone forever? She had never once heard either any of the older Haibane talk about those who had taken their Day of Flight. "Are Haibane just forgotten?" Sukare asked herself.

Sukare forced her eyes shut, hoping that sleep would eventually come.

She would wake up the next morning weeping.

7. Ch 6

Ch VI

Sukare's eyes snapped open. She quickly sat up in bed, tears flowing freely. Wiping her eyes did no good.

The dream had nearly faded when the door to her room swung open seconds later. "Sukare," Hikari panted, visibly out of breath. "You were yelling."

"Nightmare," Sukare replied, her dream seeming less and less real. Hikari switched on the light.

"You're covered with sweat." Hikari walked to Sukare's side and put a hand on her forehead. "You don't feel warm." Hikari sighed in relief. She took the other girl in a hug and rubbed her back. "It's just been a hard day for you."

"I'm okay," Sukare said. "I feel better." Hikari didn't reply. The blonde haired Haibane slowly leaned back. Almost a dozen of Sukare's feathers were clenched in her fist.

A summons for Sukare to appear at the Temple was present by the time Hikari had awoken the other members of Old Home. No one could explain how the Renmei could have known so quickly. Thankfully, Sukare hadn't lost any more feathers other than the small patch on her left wing.

The bare area felt naked as Sukare stood in front of Washi early the

next morning. She desperately wanted to put her wing covers on. "Let us sit," Washi began, motioning to a bench. Sukare nodded, sitting next to him under the shade. "You didn't do any thing wrong, Sukare. I'm actually glad that Nemu asked for help. Since she arrived in Glie, she always put others above her own wellbeing. It's alright, you may speak," he added, seeing that Sukare appeared nervous.

"I can't remember much," Sukare began softly. "It was like my cocoon dream. The bed was the same. I felt just as tired. But there was someone else there."

"Someone else?"

"Yes. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. I couldn't see anything. A hand grabbed mine."

"Show me how," Washi asked, offering his own hand. Sukare hesitantly placed her hand on top of his and squeezed gently. "I see," Washi commented after a moment, returning his hand to his knee.

"No one knows what awaits a Haibane on their day of flight. Though Nemu needed you, when the time comes, no Haibane goes to the altar afraid. Though it wasn't your time, I believed that you connected briefly with that unknown as Nemu was taken by it. You will be all right, Haibane Sukare. Once you establish yourself in this world those dreams should end and your feathers will grow back. Have you thought of what job you would like in Glie?"

"I think Nemu wanted me to stay at the library. I liked it there." Sukare's tone had picked up considerably at Washi's reassuring words.

"Very well. I'll let them know you'll be there tomorrow morning. Take the rest of the day for yourself. You should rest." They stood.

"Thank you," Sukare said before signaling her good bye with the bells.

Rakka and Nomu were waiting at the entrance as Sukare came out. The smile on Sukare's face settled their fears even before the girl had the chance to speak.

"I'll be okay," she said nonetheless once the bells were removed from her wings. "The communicator said if I embraced this world, the nightmares would go away and no more of my feathers would fall out. Since I think Nemu wanted it, he let me have her old job at the library."

"That's wonderful," Rakka said, hugging the slightly taller girl. "You had us worried." It still being very early in the morning, Rakka was able to walk back with Nomu and Sukare.

"I guess I had my little scare now, didn't I?" Sukare said once she and Nomu were alone in Old Home's large courtyard.

"At least it's over," Nomu replied, his voice sounding carefree.

"Well," Sukare said, stretching her arms, "I'm going back to sleep if

you don't mind. Would you get me up in a few hours?"

"No problem. Get some rest."

Nomu sighed as he tried to round up the young feathers. They were playing in the courtyard for their recess. He and the home mother were trying to get them back to the classroom for their second lesson of the morning. "You have to be stern," the house mother instructed to Nomu. She slammed her cane on the ground. "Children! Recess is over. Time to go inside!"

"Don't wanna," Shorta protested, shielding himself behind Nomu.

"Time to go," Nomu said with a humph as he picked up Shorta and began walking towards the small schoolroom. The boy kicked and squirmed to no avail. The rest of the young feathers reluctantly followed their fallen leader inside.

"Alright then," the house mother began after the children had taken their seat. "Lunch is in one hour. We have a lot to do until then." As the children moaned Nomu took his cue and left in the direction of the kitchen off the common room.

Only two days before he had chosen to become the young feathers' new caretaker. The commotion over Nemu's day of flight and Sukare's scare hadn't given him the chance to tell Sukare about his decision. It was a relief to know that they had both found a job in Glie.

The kitchen was quiet as Nomu entered. Though a few dishes from breakfast were still in the sink, they would have to wait since Nomu had only an hour to make lunch for fifteen people including himself. The house mother had instructed him the day before as they made lunch together. From now on he would be on his own. Quickly taking stock of everything in the cupboards and refrigerator, Nomu decided on turkey sandwiches and celery sticks. He eyed the stove warily, wondering whether he'd work up the courage in the next few days to actually use the seemingly rusted over device.

Nomu finished in record time, ten minutes early. A pitcher of tea was even cooling in the fridge. Suddenly Nomu remembered Sukare in the next room. "I hope I didn't wake her," he whispered to himself as he poked his head out from the curtain separating the two rooms. Sukare was still sleeping peacefully on the other side of the room.

"Hey," he called out, really not sure what to say. "Time to get up." Sukare only stirred. Sighing, Nomu crossed the distance and shook her shoulder.

Nomu nearly jumped back as Sukare jolted awake.

"Another bad dream?" Nomu asked a moment later Sukare calmed down.

"You just scared me, that's all," Sukare replied sounding unsure of herself.

"Well, okay. The young feathers will be in soon for their lunch."

Thought I might as well get you up so we can all eat together."

"You made lunch?"

"I wanted to tell you," Nomu smiled. "I chose my job too. I'm going to be helping the house mother take care of the young feathers."

"That's great," Sukare replied, standing up. "I hope you can handle them."

"Me too." Nomu laughed a little. The two soon heard the sound of the young feathers rushing up the stairs. Sukare had just enough time to run her hand through her hair before a dozen children seemed to immediately appear in the room.

"Quiet down," Nomu said in a stern voice. He was learning his role well. "The faster everyone sits down the faster everyone eats." The children reluctantly replied.

"Good," Nomu said, satisfied. Though lunch was rather noisy, it was refreshing to see that normality had returned so quickly to Old Home.

Two days later was Friday. It was nearly sunset and Sukare was finishing up her work at the library. She was almost done cataloging the week's newly arrived books.

Nemu's old office had become hers by default. The others that worked there understood all too well the short life of any Haibane. Sorting out her emotions, the comments were still uncomfortable to hear.

With conversation lacking in her new job, these thoughts had continued to bother Sukare throughout the day. Finishing her work, she took a deep breath to calm her mind. The next day was a day off after all. After saying goodbye to the head librarian, Sukare stepped outside. Kana was already waiting with her bike. Sukare gently leaned against the other girl for support as she closed her eyes for the ride back.

"Tough day?" Kana asked as they were half way home.

"Just long," Sukare replied.

"You'll get used to your new schedule soon enough," Kana added. "I remember when I started working at the clock tower. I thought I'd hate it forever."

"But then why did you choose it?"

"Cause I like fixing broken clocks. It's something that no one had to tell me about. When I saw the clock tower for the first time I immediately wanted to know how it worked." Sukare smiled at the other girl's enthusiasm. It calmed her that one-day she might be like that. In a few years she would be the girl comforting a New Feather on the ride back to Old Home.

To be continued...

End
file.